

his contemporaries. Boswell reports a saying of Johnson in 1773:—"Other people have strange notions, but they conceal them. If they have tails they hide them, but Monboddo is as jealous of his tail as a squirrel."

Burnett's work "On the Origin and Progress of Language," in which these speculations are put forward, only began to appear in 1773, but his views were evidently familiar at an earlier date. He became a Lord of Session in 1764.

CECIL H. DESCH.

University of Glasgow, January 16.

[MR. F. GILLMAN, Brook House, Matlock, has sent a letter to the same effect.—ED. NATURE.]

POPULAR ORNITHOLOGY.¹

IN producing yet another book on the birds of Great Britain¹ the editor points out that one result of the growing interest taken during recent years in the study of ornithology is a considerable addition to our knowledge of the habits of British birds; that as no comprehensive British work on the subject has appeared since those of Yarrell (revised by Newton and Saunders) and Seebohm, this knowledge is only available by searching through a large and scattered literature; that the new edition of the Naumanns' work leaves unrecorded many of the observations on the habits of our birds that have been made in our own and other countries, and that there is therefore place for a work that will bring together from every source, foreign and native, all the available information of any importance concerning the habits of British birds. To do this, and to do it in a form interesting alike to the student of animal life and the general reader, is the chief object of the present undertaking. This is to say the least an ambitious project. In carrying it out the editor will have the assistance of the following writers, J. L. Bonhote, William Farren, the Rev. F. C. R. Jourdain, W. P. Pycraft, Edmund Selous, A. Landsborough Thomson, and Miss Emma L. Turner, who have been left to arrange and treat the matter within each section of a chapter written by them "in the way best suited to his style and temperament, thus avoiding cut-and-dried uniformity with its resulting aridity."

The plan of the book differs in some important particulars from that generally adopted. Each chapter deals, not with a species, but a family, thus not only emphasising the relationship of the species, but facilitating comparative treatment and avoiding unnecessary repetition of statements that apply equally to the whole family or genus. In many cases it has been found advisable to divide the chapter into sections. In the present volumes all the finch genera are taken together "owing to the marked similarity in the general habits of the species," while the crow family has been divided into groups. But when we find the magpie and the jay grouped together for the same reason as the finches and the raven separated from the crows, and all three from the rook and the jackdaw (which are taken together), it is quite evident that "rigid uniformity in arrangement has not been attempted."

The information most often needed for reference is placed at the head of the chapter, under the title of "Preliminary Classified Notes," and refers to each species separately. These comprise (1) description of plumage; (2) distribution; (3) migration; (4) nest and eggs and information as to incubation, number of broods, &c.; (5) food; and (6) period of the year during which the species sings. So far as we can judge from the present instalment, these have been carefully pre-

pared, and contain accurate and concise information, a detailed account, however, of the geographical distribution, as expressly stated in the preface, lying outside the scope of this work, which professes to deal comprehensively only with their habits. Those portions of the chapters treating of the habits generally, and forming the greater part of the volume, are somewhat gossipy and discursive in character, and even bordering in parts on the whimsical, while their popular character may be indicated by a reference to the devotion of two-thirds of a page to such matter as an account of Charles Dickens's ravens.

Mr. Selous makes the startling statement that young goldfinches are not fed apparently more than once in an hour. But in a footnote we are told that the observations (on which the statement is founded) were, it is true, made in the United States, and the Latin name of the goldfinch was not given in the



Photo by N. F. Ticehurst.

FIG. 1.—Blue-headed Wagtail's Nest and Young in Grass. From "The British Bird-Book."

original paper. "Still, it seems probable that what applies to the North American species of goldfinch would apply to our own." Wild speculations on probability of this kind seem to be a waste of space. The "American goldfinch," as a matter of fact, is quite a different bird from our goldfinch, and is closely allied to the siskin. It is a pity that the author of this section did not learn its Latin name. We do not think this portion of the work will supersede our old friend "Newton's Yarrell."

The second volume treats of the buntings, larks, wagtails, pipits, the creeper and wren, in the order named, the treatment often inclining to the fanciful. In other places the grouping of the species, often diverse except in name, seems to have raised a slight difficulty, and some species—the shorlark, for instance—might well have received a fuller notice. Of

¹ "The British Bird-Book. An Account of all the Birds, Nests and Eggs found in the British Isles." Edited by F. B. Kirkman. Vol. i., pp. xviii+156; vol. ii., pp. 140. (London and Edinburgh: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1910.) Price 10s. 6d. net.

its habits in winter, however, we are told "little is known." But further research into literature and inquiry among observers should surely have corrected this.

A smear on the general attractiveness and beauty of the second volume is unfortunately to be noticed in the shape of a footnote wherein one of the contributors indulges in a petulant attack on reviewers. As the editor expressly repudiates responsibility for the statements made in the note he is doubtless alive to their exceedingly bad taste; but why deface the pleasing pages of the book with an acrid expression of pique which can only be of interest to one person in the world?

At the end of the work there are to be chapters on rare British birds, classification of British birds, distribution and migration of British birds, bird watching and photography, and bibliography. With regard



Photo by E. L. Turner.

FIG. 2.—Tree-creeper's Nest in a crevice in a Tree. From "The British Bird-Book."

to the illustrations, the artists include Winifred Austin, G. E. Lodge, H. Grönvold, G. E. Collins, and A. W. Seaby. The coloured plates in the present volumes are exceedingly pleasing and charming in every way, and they certainly do answer the purpose for which they have been designed. Their object is to supply something more than a portrait of each species for purposes of identification. Each picture is, with few exceptions, to offer a study of some habit of the bird or of one of its most characteristic and striking attitudes; it is to show the bird in its natural surroundings, and the thirty-four plates in these volumes are, on the whole, quite a success. In addition, we have a coloured plate of eggs, numerous photographs of nests and eggs and young, an outline map of the world, showing the six zoo-geographical

regions, and a diagram explaining the names of the various external parts and portions of the plumage of a bird. An index is promised at the end of the book, which is to be completed in twelve of these sections or volumes.

The twenty plates of eggs which, with very short letterpress, are meant to supplement the "Sketch Book of British Birds," can hardly be said to be worth publication.¹

The book is, in fact, too cheap. We cannot expect twenty coloured plates for five shillings, and the cheap reproduction has been a failure. Yet it was hoped that by having a faithful representation of one normal specimen of each species a key would be furnished by which identification might be made comparatively easy. This hope would have been better sustained, poor as the figures are, had they been correctly named. But, turning to plate iii., we find the egg of the black-throated thrush referred to the rock thrush and *vice versa*, that of the "American thrush" (*Turdus migratorius*) to the redwing, that of the redwing to the missel thrush, and that of the missel thrush to the American thrush; while on plate xv. the eggs of the purple sandpiper and little stint do duty for one another. We have not had patience to go through all of them. This deplorable confusion has been caused by the careless insertion of the reference numbers. But it is fatal to the key, and will prove fatal to the beginner's attempt to identify eggs. A few lines of letterpress are devoted to each species. Turning to that relating to this plate xv., we find the wood sandpiper called the wood "tattler," an American name not in use in England, and the information that the pectoral sandpiper is an American species the nest of which is built on high grassy slopes in Lapland! It is no longer correct to say that the eggs of the knot are still unauthenticated.

THE SEA-OTTER.²

SOME twenty years ago, in the days of the Bering Sea question, Captain Snow was well known as an authority on certain of the fur-seal fisheries of the North Pacific, and he was, and still is, known as one of the few authorities on the geography of the Kurile Islands. He has now written a pleasant book telling some of his manifold adventures in this region of the world, and, above all, relating his experiences in pursuit of sea-otter. There is an interest which amounts to fascination in this singular animal. Fifty years ago it was comparatively plentiful all round the coast of the North Pacific, from California and Oregon to Kamtschatka and the Kuriles, though doubtless already much less abundant than in Steller's time, more than a hundred years before. But nowadays it has dwindled to very small numbers, here and there among the Aleutian and Kurile Islands, and these small numbers dwindle more and more every year. I know of no living naturalist who has seen the creature in its haunts, nor has any zoological garden ever possessed it. Once upon a time, by the way, I spent a fortnight on Copper Island, at the north end of which, five or six miles from my hut, was a large rookery of sea-otters; but while I was provided with passports giving me perfect freedom of access to the seal-rookeries, there was no word said about sea-otters; and day after day a polite functionary made excuses and apologies, a Cossack guard made

¹ "British Birds' Eggs." By A. F. Lydon. Pp. 62+20 plates. (London: S.P.C.K., 1900.) Price 5s.

² "In Forbidden Seas." Recollections of Sea-Otter Hunting in the Kurils. By H. J. Snow, F.R.G.S. Pp. xiv+303. (London: Edward Arnold, 1910.) Price 12s. 6d. net.